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# Relations and the Moral Circle

John Jacobi, *The Wildist Institute*

**Abstract**—Although wildism professes to be a non-humanist philosophy, it has been unclear how it diverges from the “expanded moral circle” approach traditionally taken in environmental ethics. This piece makes the distinction clearer by better connecting the wildist concept of *relations* to the ethical imperative to rewild. Specifically, while humanist ideologies wish to expand the scope of individual altruism and to enforce this expanded scope with technical infrastructure, wildists note that nature has value only because individuals grant it value, perhaps even for non-altruistic reasons, so they advocate global action as only a temporary coalition against the common threat of industry.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Earlier in 2016, I published “The Foundations of Wildist Ethics,” the culmination of some years of conversations and study about the tension between the technical and the biological. There were, however, a few defects, and one of them was egregious: I didn’t distinguish properly between those views that expand the humanist project and those views that fundamentally challenge it. As a result, some of my metaphors, explanations, and examples were either mixed up themselves or failed to properly communicate their challenge to humanism.

This piece is an attempt to better emphasize and explain those concepts and ideas that I inadequately addressed in “Foundations.” In particular, I better link wildlands advocacy and the conservation of human nature; I take a stronger position on the source of values; and I clarify the concept of *relations* and how it plays into the ethical imperative to rewild.

I should admit here that the small element of confusion that I generated in my text was due primarily to my own failure to properly draw out the consequences of what I was saying. Thus, while the ideas offered here do not fundamentally change anything in “Foundations,” I might have used more particular wording in certain places in the text. In order to resolve this, readers should favor this text over “Foundations” wherever there are minor discrepancies.

## II. THE PREVAILING PARADIGM IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Deep ecology’s core contention is that nature has intrinsic value, but from the very beginning environmental ethicists (nearly all belonging to some variant of eco-radicalism) have had to confront a series of philosophical conundrums attached to this claim. For example, where does this value come from? And, regarding the most popular formulation of deep ecology, “left biocentrism” or “biocentric egalitarianism,” should we understand swatting a fly or other similar acts as having the same degree of moral seriousness as murdering a person? Is egalitarianism at the cellular, organismic, or ecosystem level? And so on.

The traditional response has been squarely within the humanist tradition, despite attempts to break free of these constraints. For example, some deep ecologists speak of the “rights” of nature, which is clearly an expansion of humanism, no more a challenge to it than the animal rights activists who push for societies to include some animals in their definition of sentience.

In one attempt to remove this talk of “rights,” some deep ecologists devised an ill-defined and even more terribly articulated concept of “the expanded self.” Devall (1987) explains: “If we experience the world as an extension of ourselves, if we have a broader and deeper identification, then we feel hurt when other beings, including non-human beings, are hurt.” In another, closely related, concept, Leopold speaks of a “land ethic” under which humans situate themselves within a “biotic community.”

But these formulations are also an extension of the humanist project. As Singer (1981) writes, along with several others, the history of civilization is the history of human beings expanding the circle of moral consideration. It begins with the band, moves outward to the tribe, the chiefdom, the ethnic group, the state, and so on, until now, when the dominant ideology of industrial civilization sustains and enforces a moral circle encapsulating all of humanity. And even here we have the margins of humanist activism, usually left-wing movements, pushing for consideration of all sentient creatures.

One of the more recent and not-entirely-resolved expansions of the moral circle included the shift from white supremacist, colonial, and racial progressive narratives to the inclusion of blacks and other non-whites. This shift was encouraged by changing technical and economic conditions for quite a while before social revolutions began to catch up. This is why, by the time events like the American Civil War occurred, there was a fundamental tension between the humanistic language of the US Constitution or the documents of the French Revolution and the continuing institution of slavery. Arguably, the industrial revolution was the major event that allowed these new humanist ideas to become dominant.

Also in the early years of industry, humanist activists developed certain characteristics, like extreme sympathy for victimized classes, in order to resolve the tension between humanist ideals and the state of, for example, the poor living in slums. Thus, when Aldo Leopold argues for a “biotic community,” he is doing nothing new, and this explains why some conservationists and environmentalists argue that their fight for the recognition of nature’s rights is akin to the recognition of black people’s rights or poor people’s rights.

This project also comes with no truly new problems. For example, it is sometimes said that the quest to find the basis for nature’s rights is a major problem for environmental ethicists. But this is not all that different from the problem faced by the French *philosophes* who attempted to find justification for the rights of man. Tellingly, the answers are very similar. Then, the French *philosophes* established the concept of “natural [materially intrinsic] rights,” while now environmental ethicists like Holmes Rolston III argue that nature’s value is objective. And in regards to economic conditions, then, the *philosophes*’ concept of rights made for a very efficient blueprint by which society could run more smoothly, with ideally no excluded classes, which was useful for production; now, the concept of nature’s rights is being produced by economic and technical conditions that require nature be preserved for the survival of the industrial system. In other words, environmental ethics conceived in this way is merely an expansion of humanism and a direct product of the dominant social system.

### III. THE WILDIST CRITIQUE

Clearly, “rights” is an illegitimate concept. A scientifically-informed understanding is that values come from valuers, based on the various processes going on

in their brain and whatever external circumstance affects those processes. That is, “nature has intrinsic value when it is valued (verb transitive) for its own sake, as an end in itself” (Callicott, 1995). Furthermore, even if one tried, one could not heed the calls of some deep ecologists to “think like a mountain.” We humans are tethered to a human perspective, and the mountain, in any case, has none.

For these reasons and more I will not address here, wildists dispose of the rights concept completely. There is no right to autonomy (in the humanist sense), to equality, to respect, and so forth, and one cannot condemn an action of another human being based on the idea that he violated some other thing’s rights. This includes even the most egregious of actions, like murder. Note that this does not mean that actions are not condemnable; only that the rights concept is insufficient.

I also generally avoid the terms “anthropocentric” and “eco-” or “biocentric.” For one thing, all three terms are notoriously ill-defined, “anthropocentrism” sometimes being equated with the very idea that something is valuable only if humans value it. Clearly, by this definition, wildism is anthropocentric, since, being informed by scientific materialism, we cannot say that a world without humans “has” value any longer, simply because it is no longer being valued. See Bradford (1989) for more on this point. And insofar as “anthropocentrism” means “the belief that humans are due superior ethical consideration compared to other creatures,” it might be useful to invoke it only in order to reject it; but because the term is so closely associated with eco- and biocentrism, it is best to simply let it go.

Biocentrism’s premise that all living things have intrinsic value is irrelevant to wildism both because it is articulated as an expansion of humanism and because of its bias for “life.” The former has been addressed. The latter is an issue because wildist concern for “life” generally is a subset of the more pressing and relevant concern for *wildness*. And wildness includes death, pain, suffering, and a good deal of awful things just as much as it contains cozy ideas like “life.” Thus, rhetoric that speaks of a “dying earth,” for example, is revealed to have a rather ridiculous character.

Of course, some have pointed out that biocentrists take a metaphorical approach to include these concepts. Devall and Sessions (1985, pp. 70-71), for instance, write, “The term ‘life’ is used here in a more comprehensive non-technical way to refer also to what

biologists (and also dictionaries) classify as ‘non-living’; rivers (watersheds), landscapes, ecosystems. For supporters of deep ecology, slogans such as ‘let the river live’ illustrate this broader usage so common in most cultures.” However, this comes across as intellectual laziness, and it is clear that the language of “life” should be tossed. In the specific example cited by Naess and Sessions, the concept of “wildness” is better anyway.

Ecocentrism includes non-living things, but beyond this distinguishing it from biocentrism is a difficult task. It is also, like biocentrism, simply an untenable ethic, or at least not a very clear one. For instance, eco-centrism nearly always needs to be accompanied by systems like “biospherical egalitarianism” to explain what, exactly, the ethic obligates us humans to do. Yet even if we maintain some “egalitarian” ethic only at the level of “ecosystems,” we resolve no problems associated with the more extensive egalitarianism in the traditional formulation. For example, by what do we mean “ecosystem”? Even ecologists admit that it is an amorphous concept. Furthermore, are all ecosystem’s truly equal? Would destroying the rainforest be just as devastating as destroying a small forest in upstate New York? These kinds of questions quickly get absurd.

Ecocentrism is also closely associated with the “thinking like a mountain” sentiment, its advocates arguing that the value of nature does not come from what it offers humans, or at least it does not exclusively come from this idea. Of course, natural processes are important for animals to live, so can be said to have value to non-human creatures, but this just transforms the question. Why should we be concerned with that animal?

Finally, this expansion of the moral circle is the product of and can only be maintained by artificial systems, especially the material technical base on which societies are built. For example, to press an ideology that values all of humanity is only tenable with industrial infrastructure. In fact, one could argue that no individual human even holds true to the ideology. We may not outright reject the notion that we should care for every human equally (because this is the dominant ideology, and it would be rather radical to reject the notion), but in practice we favor those close or useful to us. For sure, there are oversocialized individuals who truly are motivated by the expanded circle, and who feel immense guilt when it is violated, but for the most part the expressions of this ideology are by technical systems rather than individual humans, such as

NGOs that operate autonomously of any individual or small group of individuals in order to do humanitarian work. In other words, the ideology is not the product of man’s nature; it is a product of the technical system itself. We note that without technical infrastructure, some primitive people would, for example, pluck the feathers from living birds and then cook them to death (Turnbull, 1961, p. 101; 1965, p. 161). And of course primitive people could be very violent to human outsiders (e.g., Chagnon, 1997).

#### IV. THE WILDIST ALTERNATIVE

Wildists adopt a scientific materialist, Darwinian perspective: things are valuable when humans value them. Furthermore, to say that someone values something is to make a statement about the physical state of that person’s brain, hormones, and so forth. And to say that the person ought to do something is a shortened way of saying “If you value X, you ought to do Y.” If you value nature, for instance, you ought to preserve it. There is technically a logical jump here from the “is” to the “ought,” but it is akin to the problem of induction, posing no serious threat to the reasonableness of the “ought.”

Thus, the starting point of wildism is an “is”: we value nature intrinsically. In “Foundations” I wrote that “intrinsic” means “non-instrumental” and “non-derivative” (p. 15). However, “non-instrumental” is not always strictly accurate. I used it for much the same reason I still sometimes speak of “free will”: the reality underlying what we perceive as free will is non-intuitive, and acting as though we have free will is still necessary for various reasons. Still, after further thought I have concluded that it poses no real risk to say that our valuing nature is in some ways instrumental, but not in the solely economic sense.

To say that nature has “intrinsic” value, then, is mostly a way of saying “here is a point at which further elaboration is unhelpful.” That is, we could say that I value nature because of a love of natural noise (compared to the industrial racket), because of aesthetic preference, because of my cravings for communion with animals to a greater degree than is possible in the city, because of my desire for purposeful, goal-oriented activity, or I could even say “simply because.” And then another person might name some other specific convergence of wants and needs that join to make him concerned with nature, the world maintained by the absence of human control. Elaboration on these

points, however, is unhelpful, because the state of nature makes now the time to figure out the basis on which we can find political affinity. The starting point of this political project, the thing with non-derivative or intrinsic value, is nature.

Before moving forward, let's note a few things. First, although the wildist mode of analysis uses moral language, it does not attempt to obscure the fact that morals are really just another way of speaking about psychological realities. This is why, for instance, "Foundations" drew so heavily from the field of moral psychology. The implications of this is that "convincing" people of our values is really just another way of saying we are *finding* people who already have the capacity to value these things, and since we have no way of knowing whether we or some other factor will awaken this capacity, we converse with them while perceiving this as an act of will against will. Perhaps it is unhelpful to say that "will" in light of scientific materialism is an illusion, much like it would be unhelpful to say that Newtonian physics in light of quantum science is an illusion. Both Newtonian physics and will are a part of our reality in an important sense. The point is just to understand the "deeper" realities that underlie them. See "Foundations," pp. 10-11 for a somewhat more extended discussion on this point.

Also note that many components of the wildist ideology are instrumentalized, not-exactly-arbitrary cut-off points for the sake of political unity. (This is not to say that the moral principles of the individual members are instrumentalized, only the collectively agreed-upon markers.) One example is the assertion of the intrinsic value of nature (rather than, say, a highly-detailed list of things that make nature valuable), and another is, as discussed in "Foundations," the assertion that wildness has value enough to make civilization morally unjustifiable. I write, for instance, that "while there can be more or less radical elements within the bounds set by the given benchmarks, they are narrow enough to entail a politically discrete population of conservationists and not so broad as to be meaningless" (p. 19). We are, in other words, forming a coalition of individuals with a range of moral beliefs definite enough to produce a clear goal and a population unified enough to achieve that goal. Each of the individuals involved finds the coalition to be necessary because industry has violated the autonomy of nature in so thorough and unrelenting a manner that we hope to now move things in the opposite direction.

## V. CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

### A. Are Subjective Values Impotent Values?

Some environmentalists are uneasy with subjectivizing nature's value. In their view, this makes our arguments impotent, or at least weaker, and it reduces us to Machiavellianism. However, such worry is unnecessary.

For instance, some might argue that if there is no basis for our moralities, then the world is simply a collection of interest groups competing against each other, and the human story is just a story of clashing selfishnesses. This is only partially accurate. It is true that, since there is no objective value, and since subjective values are bound to have irreconcilable differences, then resolving those differences is a question of power, territory, and other such things. This is true even in the case of objective value, unless one believes in some supernatural mechanism for retribution, like Karma.

However, it is incorrect to presume that all human interests are inherently selfish. Some may be altruistic, and truly so. Those who argue that this is not a Darwinian perspective misunderstand evolution. The so-called "selfish gene" theory (an unfortunate metaphor that has obscured more than clarified) applies in a strict sense *only* to the gene, and it therefore applies to the organism only so much as it is a function of the gene's selfishness. In other words, an organism may be selfish *or* altruistic depending on the advantage that this confers to the genes. This is why a male spider mates with a female spider even though it puts him at risk of being eaten by the female.

So while human social life is indeed one of competing interests, this need not mean that we have to seek ulterior motives underneath every interaction, nor does it mean that our quest to achieve political goals as a group with a defined range of interests is best achieved by pulling one over on some other group. Cooperation, while not always the best path forward, is certainly an effective possibility.

Nevertheless, the Darwinian perspective *does* mean that humans are inclined to a higher degree of selfishness than the humanist would like. This is simply because organisms are bound to be largely self-interested, since this self-interest would preserve their own genes. The extent to which we are altruistic usually only expands to a small circle of friends, family, and close ones, called *relations*. More on this below.

Finally, if one is ever faced with an opponent who laughs at the idea of nature's value because of its subjectivity, one can simply point out that the same applies to his belief in nature's non-value. If subjectivizing value truly does weaken value-claims, it does so to all claims, not just conservationist ones.

### B. Why Care for Non-Human Nature?

Another worry of some environmentalists is more substantial: they worry that by saying that nature has value only because humans value it, this would reduce our efforts to conserve non-human nature. This worry is unfounded for several reasons.

For one thing, if a wildist professes to have disdain for largely artificial environments and hopes to see these environments collapse into less managed states, then I would regard this person as not very serious if he then failed to preserve the very unmanaged places that he professes to value. These are the freest places available to us as individuals, and, furthermore, by conserving them we are ensuring a quicker rebound from nature as industry's stronghold is broken.

Of course, since humans are bound to their puny individual perspectives, then without reasoning abilities each wildist would only be concerned with the nature with which he is familiar. Luckily, we *do* have reason and science, and with these intellectual tools we can discern reasons to form a coalition to conserve even that nature with which we are not individually concerned. For instance, the interconnection of world ecosystems indicates that we should be concerned with at least some foreign conservationist efforts. And global threats like climate change and the industrial system as a whole push disparate efforts toward unity.

Of course, this global networked coalition requires global infrastructure, something we ultimately hope to see collapse, but for now it is clear that at least some large-scale, networked coordination is a necessary temporary step toward effective political action. The difference between this and the humanist position is that the humanist environmentalists see permanence of this infrastructure as legitimate and attempt to "improve" human nature to suit it to the infrastructure. Thus, they attempt to enforce an expanded moral circle that includes all of humanity and nature, while the wildists simply acknowledge that together each unit of resistance is stronger at this time. (As a brief aside, human biology changing to suit artificial conditions is not a negative thing in every instance. Boyd and Richerson, 2005, show, in fact, that it is now simply a

part of the human condition. I'll remind the readers, then, that wildists have chosen the industrial mode of production because of its scale and perpetuity. See pp. 18-19, 37-38 of "Foundations" for a more sophisticated treatment of this point.)

This means it is fine to principally dedicate oneself to the ecosystems that are of most direct value. For instance, Dave Foreman, an activist behind The Wildlands Network, works primarily on North American ecosystems, hoping to preserve core building blocks of the continent until industry settles down or collapses. But his rewilding efforts are still connected to a larger movement that has now taken hold in Europe. From a wildist perspective, coordination between these two efforts is only expected to the degree that each benefits the other. At this point in time, mutual benefit is almost assured.

Of course, this set up does mean that animal rights ideologies, for example, and their cousin ideologies, would be excluded as justifications for wildist conservation. It is perfectly fine to kill invasive species if these species will degrade a wild area; it is perfectly fine to hunt a bear; and no human is expected to care too viscerally about an endangered turtle in the US if he lives in China. This is no doubt repugnant to some involved in the environmentalist movement, but it is not because wildists are not aware of the implications of our argument. We are aware, and we are not bothered by them.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The traditional approach in environmental ethics argues that humans should expand moral consideration from humans to the environment, and this often involves applying some formulation of "rights" to non-human units, the boundaries of those units a recurring point of tension. However, the metaphysical claims on which these "rights" arguments rest are false. Furthermore, even if one accepted wildist metaphysics, arguing that nature has rights because humans confer the rights, this formulation would still be incompatible with wildism, because it would be incompatible with human nature.

For one thing, an expanded moral circle is only sustained by underlying technical infrastructure, like communications technologies. For another, one cannot expect a human being to feel altruism toward things he doesn't know, or even many people and animals he does know but that aren't close to him. We observe, for instance, that some in primitive tribes would pluck

the feathers from living birds and then cook them to death. We also note that primitive man had no compunction against treating outsiders differently from his own relations. The point here is not to enforce this behavior, which would contradict the concern for wilderness. It is only to acknowledge that in a world less managed by humans and technical systems, these sorts of behaviors would become more prevalent, just as certain ecological trends blossom when human artifice is removed from the landscape. We also note that to a large degree these behaviors are still present in man, and the expanded moral circle is truly only enforced by technical systems themselves, like NGOs that operate autonomously of any one human or group of humans. On the individual and small group level, humans still favor their relations.

Thus, wildists, valuing nature, including human nature, and not hoping to improve it, do not wish to enforce an expanded altruistic outlook on human beings. Rather, *wildness* is a rational ideal borne from the fact that it addresses a convergence of concerns of value to wildists. Put simply, the world maintained by the absence of artificial control, the unmanaged world, also known as *nature*, has value that is irreducible to any one thing that gives it value. Furthermore, the core quality of nature, its wildness, itself has value.

On an individual basis, we can expect that a wildist would only or mostly be concerned with those landscapes and people and animals that concern him directly. This is why it is no matter that some may be involved in preserving the ecological building blocks most relevant to their own geographical region. However, reasoned analysis clearly makes a temporary coalition desirable. The interconnection of ecosystems, and the fact that nearly all conservationists face the same core threat of industry, means that individuals and their small groups may network to form a resilient means of resisting industrial development, regardless of how they personally feel about others in the movement, or whether or not they feel for the others at all. Rewilding, then, is a collective task only insofar as the coalition is necessary, and talk of “collective human duty” should be avoided. And of course, the ultimate practical goal is to extinguish the need for a coalition by eventually extinguishing, for all practical purposes, the very industrial threat that makes it necessary.

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# Refuting the Apartheid Alternative

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**Abstract**—Recently a proposed alternative to the traditional conservationist approach has popped onto the scene. It calls itself “eco-modernism,” and rather than advocating decreased economic growth, it calls for the acceleration of technical and economic innovation, saying that this will leave more land for wildlife. The eco-modernists have also borrowed concepts like “rewilding” from the wildness-centered conservationists, which has led to charges of revisionism. This paper argues against the civilization/nature apartheid scheme that the eco-modernists advocate, and it outlines the moral differences between their humanist approach and the wildist approach to conservation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Wildism seems to require the collapse of industry: we wildists state, very plainly, that we care for the autonomy of nature such that the civilized agricultural mode of production and later are morally unjustifiable. How, then, could we even entertain the notion that there is an alternative to collapse?

The answer is simple: if the overall process of technical evolution begins to decrease civilization’s footprint, especially in regards to the amount of physical land it requires, then this will result in an increase of wildness and nature’s restoration. Such a thing has not yet happened except through collapse, but that does not necessarily make it impossible. Our question, then, is whether technical development is decreasing human impact or looks like it will be doing this in the near future. Note that because of the wildist critique of progress (Jacobi, 2016, pp. 22-27), we have no illusion that any group of humans, no matter how organized, can *steer* overall technical development. Our concern is mainly one of analysis and prediction.

Some evidence suggests that civilization’s impact may indeed decrease in the coming years, thanks to digital technology, new energy sources, ecological necessity, and other such factors. Armed with this evidence, some have proposed various alternatives that all fall under the banner of “half-earth proposals.” These proposals are unique in that they are appealing both to progressivist environmentalists, like the so-called eco-modernists, while also maintaining appeal

among wildness-centered conservationists. The idea is that humans can continue with civilization in some parts of the earth so long as non-human nature is able to flourish in wild conditions.

Here I will outline an apartheid proposal that is as attractive as possible to wildists and then explain why no such proposal would ever be sufficient as an end goal, for both moral and empirical reasons. That said, I argue that the logic of apartheid does not necessarily carry over to “half-earth” proposals, arguing that the later could be a positive development. With some caveats, then, I conclude that conservationists should engage in active work under these campaigns.

## II. THE EMPIRICAL PROBLEMS

The most important advocates of human/nature apartheid tend to be associated with The Breakthrough Institute, a think tank dedicated to “modernizing environmentalism.” Indeed, the landmark document in support of the idea was a report put out by the institute and entitled *Nature Unbound: Decoupling for Conservation*. Other important texts include *Green Delusions* by Martin Lewis, in which the idea of “decoupling” was first proposed, and most of the work of Jesse Ausubel, who is by far the most convincing and data-driven advocate of apartheid.

The empirical evidence in support of the eco-modernist program is strong, and in many instances it is modest in precisely the appropriate places. Indeed, many aspects of eco-modernism are refreshing to those environmentalists who find themselves surrounded on all sides by the irrationalism and lack of pragmatism pervading the movement. This is no doubt why it has gained such strength in such short time, especially when this is combined with their beautiful marketing.

The eco-modernists’ primary assertion is that industrial production can be “de-coupled” from land use and other environmental problems. This is not a new argument. The story of progressivism is the story of elites calling for more, more, more innovation. Where these newcomers catch attention, however, is their substantial evidence that this process has already taken place and could continue to. In fact, many industries began to decouple just as environmentalism became a dominant force in industrial societies, around the

1970s. This is a large part of the reason why the prophecies of doomers like Ehrlich never really materialized.

One of the most striking examples of decoupling is corn production, which has “quintupled...while using the same or even less land.” A similar thing has occurred with potatoes and chicken (*ibid.*). One can also see many commodities plateauing and even dropping rapidly in recent years (see Figure 2), a trend that has been observed in plastics, paper, timber, lead, aluminum, copper, chromium, iron ore, and many more. Ausubel argues that several other commodities, like nickel, electricity, and cobalt, could also be peaking as well.

The beautiful thing about most of these commodities is that their decrease means more land for wildlife, whether or not they are being offset by other environmental trouble-makers, like digital technologies. Of course, where the new pressure is going (when it isn’t simply dissipating) is an important concern, and indeed it is one of the problems with the extent to which eco-modernists take their decoupling claims, but more, bigger, and more connected wildlands are good developments. This is not least because, as The Wildlands Network and others have shown (Foreman, 2004), it mitigates and protects against ongoing environmental problems, keeps basic ecological building blocks intact even if industrial civilization does begin to collapse, and allows these building blocks to restore themselves and remain resilient against permanent problems like climate change.

But the eco-modernists are not arguing anything like this. Instead, they argue that because of the decoupling phenomenon, humans should, instead of slowing down industrial and economic development, kick it into high gear. Moreover, instead of viewing the possibility of an Anthropocene as a great moral warning, humans should embrace it, baptizing themselves fully into the role of planetary managers.

But the empirical evidence does not support this narrative. For one thing, the trends are not all good, and though the eco-modernists are open about this, their response is essentially a faith-based one, compelling only to those who are so strongly attached to the civilizing project that they are willing to take great ecological risks to save it. Notable bad trends include the fact that industrial production has not decoupled from the oceans,—one of the eco-modernists’ major areas of concern—and greenhouse gas emissions are

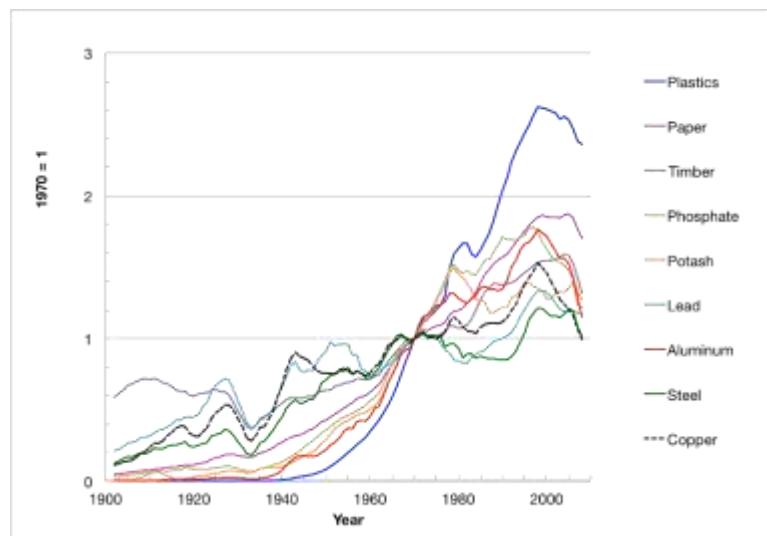


Figure 1. Taken from Ausubel (2015). Data source: USGS National Minerals Information Center.

not at all on the decrease—something they don’t mention much at all, but, ironically, one of the main reasons the oceans are doing so poorly.

In fact, economic trends around emissions are a particularly powerful blow to the eco-modernist vision. Since the Industrial Revolution, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have almost only ever decreased in cases of economic decline and collapse, e.g., the Great Depression, the recession after the 1980 oil shock, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the recent 2008 recession (Caradonna, et al., 2015; Schneider, Martinez-Alier, & Kallis, 2011; Peters, et al., 2012). In the 2008-2009 case, emissions rebounded so drastically with economic rebound that they “more than offset...the decrease” that had been achieved (Peters, et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the extinction crisis continues to worsen. Scientists estimate that we’ve increased the extinction rate by at least 1,000 times since the Industrial Revolution, and it is now accepted that we are going through the sixth mass extinction event in geological history, the previous ones having been caused by asteroids or volcanoes or other natural phenomena, but this one being caused by industrial civilization (Kolbert, 2014). I have not witnessed any eco-modernists address the extinction crisis.

Even apart from specific problems and lines of evidence, the eco-modernists have not quite shown how the trend of decoupling applies or can apply to the industrial economy as a whole. For sure, the trends are observable for specific materials, but they can just as easily be offset by problems elsewhere, and problems like the ones just noted indicate that that is exactly what is happening. Because economics is complex,

this failure is understandable, and only a confluence of data after some study would be able to make a convincing case. And this may just happen. However, the data available now are not looking good for the eco-modernists. Civilizations have a history of overreaching and then collapsing due to precisely the kinds of ecological troubles the industrial one is now facing, and some experts have argued that collapse of industry is very near inevitable (Motesharrel, Rivas, & Kalnay, 2014; Tainter, 1990; Wright, 2004).

In *Nature Unbound*, I only found one brief mention of one of the problems related to a whole-economy view, but it took up less than half a page and made clear the stark difference between eco-modernist and wildist goals. The section mentions the phenomenon known as “rebound,” where improved efficiency results in more consumption rather than less. But, the piece goes on to say, “had our...technologies not improved dramatically over centuries, the human population would probably be significantly smaller and poorer.” As if our current population levels are desirable! Their counter-argument to the rebound objection is also insufficient, as they note only that material goods eventually reach a point of demand saturation. Unfortunately, they do not address whether the demands for other, newer goods create a good trade-off.

There’s much more evidence to offer, but this is sufficient for now, especially since the moral case against apartheid is much more relevant. In regards to the empirical evidence, we can conclude that while it doesn’t quite support the eco-modernist narrative, it does strongly support the main soft claim: that insofar as it is an observable and somewhat predictable economic trend, the phenomenon of “decoupling” is another strong tool in the hands of the conservationists. There is no reason to not take advantage of the phenomenon in the same way that conservationists have used wilderness areas, ecological and evolutionary science, and other tools to preserve nature and nature’s wildness.

### III. THE MORAL CONCERNs

#### A. *The Other Side*

The real problem with the apartheid proposal is moral. Wilderness-centered conservation, which in the conventional account began with Muir, began with a skeptical look toward civilization, a willingness to dispose of it in pursuit of nature. The eco-modernists begin from a radically different point: they love nature,

fine, but their primary focus is saving civilization, which they believe can coexist with nature. This of course means that they believe it can coexist with only some of nature, since the apartheid proposal explicitly legitimizes a non-natural side, a side for civilization.

One could say, then, that the eco-modernists “do not go far enough.” But this is not quite accurate. The problem isn’t that the eco-modernists aren’t radical enough, but that they want something fundamentally different. This is clear when we pay closer attention to the civilization side of apartheid, see how disgusting it is, and realize that *they are arguing for it*.

Crist (2015) has written a poignant critique on the topic of nature on the civilization side. She points out that the eco-modernists advocate concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), intensified agriculture, “aquaculture,” and other similar technical solutions to intensive production. But, she writes,

*Industrial agriculture occupies extensive territories, after stripping them of their native life and engineering them for the production of grains, protein, oils, and fiber, most of which do not even directly serve as human food but as raw materials for industrial processing. An even larger portion of the globe allotted to livestock grazing is also roundly dominated, displacing wild animals, plants, and natural ecologies. In CAFOs farm animals are dispossessed of their natural life cycles, and treated as little more than easily subjugated objects to be rapidly turned over into commodities. Meanwhile, the vast majority of so-called fisheries are fished to capacity or overfished, nine out of ten big fish are gone, and massive habitat destruction of continental shelves and increasingly of sea mounts are the legacy of industrial fishing. On all fronts, industrial food production is a ruthless, machine-mediated subjugation of land and seas as well as of wild and domestic beings.*

In other words, the civilization side of the apartheid scheme will leave humanity “still very much coupled” with nature—except, Crist writes, “‘coupled’ is hardly the right word—comprehensively dominated is a more accurate depiction.”

One might argue that this is mere tugging on the heartstrings. With a pragmatic approach, the math is simple: more intensive production here means vastly freer circumstances elsewhere. That doesn’t mean the

“here” is pretty, but it’s the most promising approach we’ve got.

Indeed, the eco-modernists argue just this. Lewis, one of the originators of the decoupling idea in its eco-modernist incarnation, calls his approach “radical pragmatism.” The language of pragmatism and compromise also pervades the writings and reports of The Breakthrough Institute.

However, the ethical claims on which this equation is based are faulty. Admittedly, Crist herself remains susceptible to the eco-modernist response, and she is not alone among us wildness-centered conservationists. A common ethical scheme in our ranks speaks of the “rights” of nature or some similar concept. It speaks as though nature should be the next beneficiary of an expanded humanist philosophy, a continuation of what has occurred throughout the history of civilization in its move from band to tribe, tribe to race, race to nation, nation to humanity.

This is also the common ethical lens through which the public sees environmentalism. Animal rights ideologies are rapidly becoming more common, and often-times conservation projects find it easiest to mobilize people when they can put specific animals or ecosystems before the public. When nature or elements of nature are branded as victims of humanity’s technical ambitions, it is easy to invoke the dominant values of sympathy, equality, and solidarity to incite political action.

But, as I argue more extensively in “Relations and the Moral Circle,” this ethical lens is foggy and broken to begin with, and it is completely shattered under a scientific materialist approach. When we acknowledge the core materialist assertion—that matter is all that exists, and that our ethical values are therefore rooted in our biologies and evolved—one can only speak of one’s own wants and values and, in the context of collective action, an agreed upon spectrum that unifies a politically discrete population. After this, which values become dominant is a question of power and chance in the short term and fate and chance in the long term.

With this in mind, the eco-modernists can and do still say that the belief in the goodness of technical progress is their starting point. But then we see why wildism can have nothing to do with eco-modernism, since its central claim is that progress is a flawed mythology—including its applications to human nature. In

other words, it is a delusion to think that nature, including human nature, can be improved by civilization.

A more thorough treatment of these claims can be found in “The Foundations of Wildist Ethics,” particularly pages 22-44. The critique consists of two parts, each invalidating the two remaining components of the progressive mythology: the first attacks the idea that humans can rationally implement their blueprints onto a society in a successful manner, that is, the idea that humans control the direction of progress; and the second attacks the idea that the process of progress is good, regardless of whether or not humans have directed it.

Although eco-modernist texts do not always make clear that they accept the first element of the critique, many times they do, and Ausubel in particular makes it clear that he holds views similar to wildists in this regard. This is why Ausubel’s primary emphasis is on predicting *continued* decoupling trends rather than on implementing an abstract blueprint of how the economy should run. However, eco-modernists, including Ausubel, still believe the fundamental point that progress has been good, including and especially for human beings.

This is the core difference between them and wildists. As I point out in “Foundations,” civilization is simply not desirable, and the process of domestication—which has been and is happening to humans just as much as the animals we breed—is a repugnant process, especially at industrial scales. One clear and well-understood implication of civilization, for example, is increased complexity, which leads to more regimentation and more power to large organizations at the expense of small groups. I write,

*In the context of wild nature, nature provides the necessary components for survival. But when humans modify nature, they must keep up the process of perpetual modification, because the rest of the natural system has not evolved to function in that state. That is, humans must use their energy and labor to “fill in the gaps.” For example, without any human intervention, natural processes will deal with animal feces. But a toilet requires entire technical systems of human labor, waste disposal, state management, and so forth. The plumbing is convenient, this is true, but at the cost of great overhead, necessary po-*

*licensing, and further modification of nature. A civilization is the same kind of problem magnified a thousandfold.*

A final point to note on some of the empirical problems of eco-modernism: its “modernization for all” rhetoric is almost certainly false, and I’m quite sure that the men who espouse it are aware of this. Ausubel in particular strikes me as an exceedingly reasonable man, which ultimately means that the eco-modernist rhetoric probably only points toward an ideal rather than an actual, exactly achievable vision.

More realistically, the eco-modernist vision will leave still many excluded pockets, whether that be due to inertia from bureaucracy, politics, technical ability, negative reactions from those being modernized, or, a problem no one has addressed yet, where resources actually are, that is, geographical restrictions. There is a problem with the vision of “modernization for all” when coltan, for instance, which is vital for digital technologies, mostly exists in a few places in Africa and Australia. Of course, we might move from coltan to some other good, but the bottom line is that almost any resource will only be available in particular geographies. The geopolitical factors this entails brings quite a bit of inertia to deal with, and the problem is only magnified when we consider multiple similar problems for the complex network of goods necessary for something like modernization to even be possible.

Of course, this means that the vision of island civilizations might actually be more insidious than it sounds when packaged with nice words. That’s not to say that it isn’t worth pursuing—in fact, I sincerely doubt that any response to the great problems we are facing will be without some distasteful elements—but there are serious threats associated with it, which I will discuss further in section IV, “The Dangers of Half-Earth Rhetoric.”

### *B. Martyrdom*

The first argument against apartheid, then, is that the civilization side is illegitimate in relation to both human and non-human nature, and wildists don’t want to live in it. Two responses to this, in favor of apartheid, are possible. The first says that even if civilization is not good for humans, it is the most promising moral option available, and humans who do not wish to live under civilized circumstances should be willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of non-human nature. The second says that any humans who do not

want to live in the civilization side are free to move to the nature side.

E.O. Wilson and to a lesser extent Dave Foreman have arguments similar to the first. Wilson said in one interview that he supports the half-earth proposal because it will decrease damage to the biosphere until humans decide to “settle down” (Worrall, 2014). I am unsure, but I believe that Wilson was being intentionally vague and is aware that settling down could likely mean collapse, or, as some technophiles have argued, space travel, or any other number of options, some of which are clearly undesirable. Foreman (2015) is more open about the possibility of collapse when he says that “the system is going to come down, one way or another way, on its own. My task is keeping all the building blocks of future evolution that we can.” The nature half, of course, would consist of these building blocks.

This leads us to a necessary point of clarification. The eco-modernist apartheid proposal is actually an outgrowth of a much older half-earth proposal that came from the wildness-centered conservationists. After leaving the radical conservationist group Earth First! in the late 1980s, some of the original founders created an organization that is now called The Wildlands Network. This new organization was built around a proposal that expanded the original Earth First! reserve system into a comprehensive and scientifically based proposal, later called “continental-scale conservation” and “rewilding.”

The conservation biologists who outlined this proposal introduced many new and exciting concepts, and one of the most important of these is *connectivity*—the fact that wild areas are better when linked. As a result, they devised a system of wildlife corridors and, in North America, four major megalinkages spanning the whole continent, which would leave about half of the land for wildlife and will be extremely important for animals who need to migrate due to climate change. They also counter the rather devastating effects of roads.

The most recent political formulation of this idea has been taken on by the WILD Foundation’s Harvey Locke, who is spearheading what is called the Nature Needs Half campaign, and Wilson has also come out in support of the idea with his book *Half-Earth*.

The wildness-centered origins of the half-earth proposal is part of the reason the revisionism of the eco-modernists is so appalling. They have taken the ideas of half-earth, rewilding, and “the positive agenda,” as

well as many of the other concepts from wildness-centered conservation, and then they've wrapped them all up in a polemic for industry and civilization. Note that the tangible proposal itself has not entirely changed, save the new talk of economic acceleration; the revision instead takes place in the narrative, in what it legitimates.

Still, the narrative does subtly and not so subtly transform the long-term implications of the proposal. Under the eco-modernist narrative the half-earth idea literally becomes apartheid. As many have pointed out, they strongly encourage the modernization of non-modernized people and look with disdain on the environmental damage (and alleged environmental damage) of those who are not "decoupled." In many cases this translates to a "don't touch it" mentality, a revulsion at actually interacting with nature in any natural way. This is more than clear in works like *Nature Unbound*. Contrast this with the rhetoric around Nature Needs Half, where Locke (2014) writes repeatedly that the earth needs "*at least half*" (his emphasis) and has sparse things to say about the other side.

So if we move away from the apartheid proposal and onto the more legitimate (in wildist eyes) half-earth proposal, what is the problem with the idea that humans should be willing to sacrifice their wildness and freedom for the sake of the wildness of so much more non-human nature? The answer is, simply, that wildists do not wish to be martyrs for something as abstract as "all of nature" any more than we would be martyrs for "all of humanity." This is a direct outgrowth of our challenge to humanist ideology.

The explanation here will seem a little like hairsplitting, but it is vital. When we go with the prevailing paradigm in environmental ethics, we are told that we should extend our unrelenting altruism from humans to all of nature, and we should therefore be willing to fight to the death for nature's own sake. This only makes sense if we assume that nature's value is something legitimate outside of our own existence, something we must align ourselves with. But wildists acknowledge that "nature has intrinsic value when it is valued (verb transitive) intrinsically" (Callicott, 1995). In other words, there is no objective value in nature. We fight for it because we want it, not because something external to us demands it to be so (sometimes the implicit meaning behind the shoulds and woulds of moral imperatives). See "Relations and the Moral Circle" for more on this point.

This does not mean, of course, that we cannot sacrifice our lives for the sake of something else. But an abstraction like "all of nature," while useful for intellectual parsing and theoretical discussions, is not that thing. Rather, wildists chant "live wild or die!" because we have analyzed the situation and have found that freedom and the freedom of our relations is impossible under the current conditions. Our willingness to risk death is the most assured way to regain it. Our slogan is therefore said in the same spirit as Patrick Henry's passionate words: "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" (See also "Foundations of Wildist Ethics," p. 17.)

To be clearer, this split in ethical foundations is not between the wildness-centered conservationists and the eco-modernists. It is instead a division within environmental ethics. However, it is a necessary division to point out because the eco-modernists are more in line with the prevailing paradigm, which is part of the reason their ideas have so much strength. When, for instance, Crist refutes the eco-modernist position on the assumption that humanist altruism should be expanded (rather than challenged) she leaves open the possibility of the martyrdom rebuttal. And in truth she may not even be totally averse to such a rebuttal, if she means what she says and is not simply unaware of some of the implications of her rhetoric.

The full reasoning behind the wildist view and why we still fight for non-human nature with it can again be found in "Relations in the Moral Circle." Here I will simply conclude that martyrdom is not a strong response to the moral critique of apartheid.

### C. Humans on the Nature Side?

The second response to the moral critique is, as stated above, the age-old argument, "if you don't like it, leave." A weak counter-argument would bring up the eco-modernist aversion to non-industrial forms of human-nature interaction. If adopted widely, and especially if adopted as policy, this could make it impossible for some and hard for most to leave the civilization side of the divide (see also section IV, "The Dangers of Half-Earth Rhetoric"). Recall that eco-modernists are repelled by natural human-nature interaction and are much more in favor of a "don't-touch-it" attitude. Indeed, the main value of wilderness espoused

by various eco-modernist tracts is a spiritual or aesthetic one. We'd also be wise to heed the words of a very conservative, bearded homeless gentlemen I became friends with back when I too was homeless: he told me that although he believed immigration was a problem, he didn't support increased border security, because "walls don't just keep people out; they also do real good at keeping people in."

The stronger argument points out that it is actually not a solution to wildist grievances. Is escape actually an option? The reach of industry's impacts is global, and escape is among the most impotent responses available. And given the global nature of those impacts, "escape" is far from an accurate word. A man who has left the city for the forest has reclaimed his life in only the most insignificant of ways. He may feel better, and as far as psychological health is the argument this is a somewhat reasonable justification. But on the whole he has merely fogged up his view of the world that still determines the trajectory of his life, so he is able to more easily delude himself into thinking he has freedom.

Meanwhile, the technicians continue to do their work, the emissions continue to increase, the possibility of runaway technologies remains, nuclear, biotech, and nanotech are still developed, and the escape artist remains fundamentally powerless. Interestingly, the infamous Kaczynski (2010) put it best when he said, "One does not have freedom if anyone else (especially a large organization) has power over one, no matter how benevolently, tolerantly and permissively that power may be exercised. It is important not to confuse freedom with mere permissiveness."

Which brings us to the final point against the escape argument: it assumes that civilization will always remain benign toward the other half. The whole history of civilization up to this point is not a great record, and the economic predictions of the eco-modernists are not nearly empirically sound enough to convince us otherwise.

#### *D. A Note on Collapse*

It seems, then, that collapse is still the only option worth pursuing, since the eco-modernists' only remaining argument with vague persuasive power is that accelerated decoupling will result in less physical environmental damage than collapse would. But this is hardly a claim worth paying attention to.

For one thing, the evidence that collapse is good for nature in the long-term is far-reaching, so much so that

it will be a topic for another essay. But consider as an example the case of nuclear power, often invoked as a reason why collapse couldn't happen without devastating repercussions. While this seems intuitive, the evidence of astounding wildlife rebound in the Chernobyl exclusion zone suggests a more haunting possibility: nuclear meltdown does less harm to nature than civilization.

Furthermore, the eco-modernists argue that decoupling happens only after production of a given material reaches "peak impact," which by their account was only reached by most commodities between 1940-1970. If we are to accelerate the modernization of all remaining non-modernized peoples, this would amount to an immense amount of devastation until the future vision of complete decoupling can be achieved. Unless the eco-modernists can dream up an alternative pathway to modernization, something that would betray the aversion to abstract blueprints that makes their argument so strong in the first place, they are left having to accept the fact that their plan is likely to do more physical damage to the earth than collapse, not less. And in any case, the desire to come up with an alternative pathway to modernization would only underscore their commitment to saving civilization rather than achieving a future where nature, including human nature, can be wild.

#### **IV. THE DANGERS OF HALF-EARTH RHETORIC**

As has been established, the eco-modernist apartheid proposal differs from the conservationist half-earth proposal in some important respects. However, the half-earth rhetoric is clearly only a few steps from the eco-modernist perversion, and this is just one of the many threats associated with it. So while I am tentatively supportive of the Nature Needs Half campaign and would like to see it achieve its goals, before undertaking any actions in support of it we should fully understand the risks and especially the potential perversions that the campaign could produce.

To do this, we need to understand some of the economic and technical determinants that have brought environmentalist rhetoric to the forefront of many civilized conversations. Indeed, even though wildism and, in general, wildness-centered conservation are challenges to the dominant superstructure of industrial civilization, mainstream environmentalism is clearly and in contrast a part of it. This has been true at least since the 60s and 70s and became especially clear with the establishment of Earth Day.

Arne Naess pointed this out in the document that set off the Deep Ecology movement when he noted that some environmentalism has a shallow approach, some of it a deep approach. The former agrees on many of the facts: civilization will collapse if the ecological context of economics is ignored, it would be a great loss to have animals and nature gone from our lives, etc. But their normative claims are far from the same. Mainstream environmentalism, or shallow environmentalism, recognizes the very true fact that climate change, mass extinctions, and other such things influence the world, even the world of humans, because humans are, in fact, still limited by nature, even if they don't always recognize it. Mainstreamers also note that things like pollution and other environmental problems could hurt the humanist ideal of human well-being, or even the whole progressive project of civilization. But they do not actually question progressivism and its various incarnations.

Eco-modernism is, to date, the purest form of this progressivist environmentalism, and just as mainstream environmentalism popped up at just around the time that ecological problems were becoming dire and impossible to ignore, so too is eco-modernism arising at an uncannily appropriate time, given the current material demands of civilization. The major threat is that half-earth rhetoric will take on some form similar to the eco-modernist version to be a new legitimizing narrative for these new conditions. The major threat, that is, is conservation as our new government.

Let's paint the picture of a likely future, ideological visions of either the wildists or eco-modernists aside. The scale of the current impacts of climate change, combined with politicians' unwillingness and inability to deal with it, combined with the speedy pace that any sufficient response would need but will not perfectly achieve, all combine to make it clear that at least some places, probably even a few major cities, will become casualties within the next fifty to one hundred years. Some places are going to lose, regardless. To be clear, this is not fearmongering, and it doesn't translate directly to the collapse of civilization. It's simply a reality and the conditions with which the civilizations of the future will have to cope. The US' Pentagon, for instance, lists climate change as a national security threat (Scarborough, 2016), and we *know* that rising sea levels will affect cities as major as Boston and Miami. One study found that over 400 American cities have already passed their lock-in date—meaning that

the focus should be mitigating damage, since preventing it is out of the question (Strauss, Kulp, & Levermann, 2015).

Recall the eco-modernist vision of "island cities" connected by highly efficient transport systems and with vast expanses of wilderness everywhere else. The above evidence indicates why such a vision might be a serious contender for the dominant narrative of the new conditions. To be clear, the vision isn't going to actualize itself as a smooth transition where everyone is modernized and voluntarily migrates to wherever the islands are. Instead, we can expect the use of force in many cases, and, more likely, no human intervention at all as the wilderness spreads from natural disasters. Just a look at New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina indicates what this might look like. (The example is especially appropriate because, despite the actual horrors, life for most has gone on as normal—what could be called apocalypse certainly doesn't feel like it, and won't, especially to the decadents in the Capitol.)

More than just the eco-modernists have suggested this vision. The market has moved emphatically in that direction as well. For instance, Google is working on self-driving cars, which are by now clearly going to catch on, and soon, and on the whole allow for much more efficient travel and use of resources. Musk is working on a hyperloop—perfect for connecting island cities, and devised to do just that—Tesla motors, SolarCity, and recently OpenAI. These places will not reach the whole world, but make the vision of efficiently run islands connected by high modes of transport very feasible.

And the non-wildness-centered side of conservation has a dark history standing very much in line with these kinds of visions, although perhaps more relevant are the modern instances. In recent years, ecological problems and the rhetoric of crisis has increasingly been used to justify global cooperation and the institution of global management schemes. This does not necessarily mean a government, especially since markets do so very well at making cooperation look nice, but a government is within the realm of possibility, especially given the low number of political actors total (fewer than 200 independent states) and the even lower number this island vision implies.

Consider, for instance, the ideas of the Club of Rome, which is well-known for producing the environmentalist tract *Limits to Growth*:

*In Nature organic growth proceeds according to a Master Plan, a Blueprint. Such a ‘master plan’ is missing from the process of growth and development of the world system. Now is the time to draw up a master plan for sustainable growth and world development based on our global allocation of all resources and a new global economic system.*

Or consider the suggestion of Ronald Wright, the author of *A Short History of Progress*, that we institute a global government in order to have “managed capitalism.” The basis for this argument, and the subject of his book, is the current intensity of environmental degradation and the increasing disparity between the rich and poor, which he points out were two common factors in the majority of collapses in history.

Wright’s argument is naïve, particularly because he doesn’t pay attention to the increased energy input that any management system requires—this is part of the reason the eco-modernist vision of letting nature do a lot of the work for us is so convincing—but the fundamental drive toward global unity is there, and the primary rhetoric is of an environmentalist and “collapsist” nature.

Even E.O. Wilson, who wildness-centered conservationists have come to view as an ally (and in whom even wildists find inspiration), is at best a fickle advocate of our ethic and a mixed blessing. He should by no means be shunned for his mistakes, both because he offers a loudspeaker for the ideas and because he clearly cares about wild nature dearly. But he has always toed the line between a wildness-centered ethic and a management one, and taken together what he really advocates is a sort of chimera. One could walk away from his recent book on the half-earth proposal as either an eco-modernist or a wildist, and that’s even taking into consideration his rebuttal of the Anthropocener argument.

The threat, then, for any radical conservationists is that they may unwittingly become the vanguard for the new apartheid schemes. One can imagine an unholy union between those who have no regard for civilization and those who hope to save it when the latter acknowledges, at least in an implied sense, that civilization won’t make it unless some wildernesses are created, unless some civilized places go under. One can imagine, in other words, a tactical spectrum where the radical factions make eco-modernist proposals look

good rather than being beneficial to the wildness-centered, anti-industrial conservationists.

A striking example came to me when I was working with a young conservationist on a wilderness magazine. At some point he told me that he imagined a program of “voluntary land abandonment” in order to institute the land requirements for the half-earth idea. But of course that is unrealistic. What is realistic? Well, *forced* land abandonment, which is precisely the kind of thing that happens or is considered acceptable when people are swept up in revolutionary fervor, if history is any indication. Of course, the apartheid moderates would not be able to propose such a thing, and in fact would have to stick to the rhetoric of willingness and non-violence. But they could certainly be benefitted by a more radical faction.

Even more threatening is if this fervor is directed toward only the parts of the program that are beneficial for the creation of civilized islands. A true anti-industrial effort, that is, a radical faction on the wildness-centered tactical spectrum, would need to devote a good bit of its energy to making sure those islands aren’t possible. This is because if the eco-modernist version is instituted, the human half legitimized, and the islands made efficient, it could mean a very long time until industry falls again. The eco-modernist vision in its realistic version is quite powerful because it simplifies the machinery of civilization. Instead of added complexity from artificial energy input, civilization is made to instead harness energy from systems that already exist, through the creation of wild spaces, through biotechnology, etc. (Indeed, one of the great arguments in favor of wild spaces is their benefit to biotechnics—see E.O. Wilson’s “Encyclopedia of Life” project, for instance, and his 2016 Aeon essay.) Last time this happened without corresponding damage to infrastructure was the Bubonic plague, and it actually helped keep civilization going, jump-started markets and trade, and increased the quality of life for many of the surviving. In other words, simplification without collapse would just increase the lifespan of civilization.

Of course, perhaps even with a radical eco-modernist faction the civilized islands will not be made efficient enough to survive. But the pro-civilization environmentalists have a solution for this too: space travel. Indeed, Martin Rees in his book *Our Final Hour*, after giving an overview of the great threats to civilization we are currently facing, pointed out that it may be the only way to keep up the progressive project. And Elon

Musk, who was mentioned earlier, has another project called SpaceX, which he has explicitly said is to function as a backup plan if his other projects—for sustainable energy and efficient travel—don't have the impact he hopes they will.

Let this sink in. A common argument against the wildist proposal is that collapse could have negative repercussions for vast swaths of humanity. But the technician alternative of space travel is arguably worse. How many people do you think they'll be able to fit on those ships, and what will those on earth be left with? Talk about a civilized island.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The de-coupling trend identified by the eco-modernists is real in at least a limited way, and it offers another tool for conservationists hoping to preserve and restore wildlands, including wildist conservationists. However, the prevailing narrative of the eco-modernist cadres, including and especially those at The Breakthrough Institute, is appalling, unsupported by the evidence, and points toward a future that no wildist wants. It is also a shameless attempt at revisionism, a perversion of concepts that originated from wildness-centered conservationists who first espoused a half-earth proposal.

Luckily, the wildness-centered conservationists are behind some of the largest organizations espousing the half-earth proposal, including The Wildlands Network and the groups behind the Nature Needs Half campaign. Wildists have a clear role to play in benefitting these campaigns, but should take care to avoid revisionist perversions that could transform half-earth from a radical proposal to protect *at least* half of the earth's wildlands to a literal, institutional apartheid policy separating humans from wild nature.

The best way to do this is to focus on the moral rather than empirical problems with the apartheid proposal. While empirical problems should be discussed and we should be open to changing our arguments in light of new data, graphs, facts, and numbers rarely fare well in the main channels of communication available to us, like the mass media or internet articles. Probably three arguments are worth focusing on with special forcefulness.

First, wildists, in public debates or in articles, should focus on the morally appalling things that will have to occur on "the human side" of the eco-modernist proposal. Refer, for instance, to the problems with CAFOs and aquaculture brought up by Crist. Although

the argument is more complex than just this point, it has enough emotional power that it will be a major blow to eco-modernists, especially in live debate.

Second, wildists should point out the conflict between the "modernization for all" dictum and the wants of the people who would be effected by this. While it is true that all of wildists would be good examples for logical argument, more effective figure-heads would be non-industrial peoples, preferably wildists themselves, who say that they do not want to be modernized. However, if any wildists use this tactic, they should be careful not to argue that all non-modernized peoples do not wish to be modernized, or even that most do. This is simply not true, especially amongst agricultural communities. However, on TV or in non-text-based media, the emotional force of a non-industrial wildist saying that he wishes not to be modernized and has a right to fight against it will make it difficult for eco-modernists to respond, especially since the attention of the audience of industrial humans watching will be brought to the inherently forceful nature of industrialization that they too often do not have to pay attention to.

Finally, wildists should focus *heavily* on the problem of "herding" populations into the fully modern, civilized islands that the eco-modernists envision. Here the eco-modernists will have to say that they do not advocate violence and that the entire process must be voluntary. However, the data makes it clear that this is wrong, and in this case wildists must be armed with that data and ready to use it. Remember, though, that in non-text-based media the audience will usually just hear "this person sounds like they know what they are talking about, because they are using numbers." This means that, although we should *under no circumstances* use false data, especially when accurate data is sufficient, the actual content matters less than the structure of the argument. Do not spit out so many numbers that the audience stops listening.

Finally, we should occasionally return to this question of apartheid and investigate whether economic trends have changed. If they have, we may recalibrate our argument. But the moral argument will of course remain, and with that we can say confidently that wildists will never support apartheid.

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# How Might Ecologists Make the World Safe for Biodiversity Without Getting Fired?

David Johns, *Rutgers University*

*Editor's Note:* This is a reprint from the *Bulletin of the British Ecological Society*. We've decided to include it in Vol. 1, No. 3 of *Hunter/Gatherer* because it gives a small taste of Johns' brilliant book on conservation strategy, *A New Conservation Politics*. Please buy it and read it if you are interested in the strategic aspects of wildism.

*Science without politics has no impact, politics without science can be dangerous...*

—Peter Piot, MD, co-discover of Ebola, WHO administrator and UN Under-Secretary General.

*[S]ince survival is nothing if not biological...perpetuating economic or political institutions at the expense of biological well-being of man, societies, and ecosystems may be considered maladaptive.*

—Roy Rappaport, anthropologist

*Don't expect me to do the right thing; make me do the right thing.*

—Bruce Babbitt, former US Secretary of the Interior

For those who care about the life and ecosystems they study, the news is not good. The Millennium Ecosystem goals were not met by a wide margin and there has been much handwrapping about what to do. Some have advised giving up and concentrating on what human societies, led by those with endless growth on the brain, are content to leave alone. That's not the sort of approach that ended apartheid.

## I. SOME DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

For those who are not going to give up, the path forward presents hard questions. What if begging policy makers to do the right thing means barren oceans, the end of many species, and the end of wild places (not to mention a more dreary human existence)? What if halting the loss of biodiversity and healing the wounds to species and ecosystems depends on altering the human trajectory of conquest and instead adapting human societies to them?

For scientists there are additional tough questions. What if, outside scientific jousting in journals and at meetings (and, perhaps, the courts), it is not the quality of the argument that prevails, but the quality of the clout the arguer possesses—the ability to reward or punish decision makers? What if conservation success depends less on speaking truth to power than on organizing a political force that can bring more pressure to bear on decision makers than their opponents? Many scientists *do* try to influence decision makers, of course. They provide information and advice, write for broad audiences, and encourage NGOs to lobby for conservation goals based on good science. But many scientists leave it to others to act. But what if (the last *what if!*) natural scientists, by virtue of their knowledge, passion, commitment, are pretty much the only group that can be trusted with the fate of biodiversity and leading humankind out of their destructive ways?

This essay cannot answer these grand questions but raising them provides important context for discussing ways scientists can increase their effectiveness.

## II. THINKING AND ACTING STRATEGICALLY

Acting more effectively on behalf of biodiversity depends first and foremost on thinking and acting strategically. Whatever role a scientist chooses to play—researcher, teacher, government/business advisor, activist—it is incumbent on them to decide how their role fits into an overarching plan for getting biodiversity protection from *here* (decline) to *there* (recovery). The political landscape must be understood in addition to the ecological one.

Grasping the political landscape begins with a clear goal, because that determines which aspects of the landscape are relevant. Goals may be nested hierarchically and range from protection of an area or species to a prohibition on human activities which are more global such as habitat conversion or release of toxic chemicals or greenhouse gases. Some goals are more important than others because of their direct benefits, or because the leverage achieving them provides in achieving other goals.

With goals in mind other strategic questions can then be addressed:

- Who has the power to make the decisions needed to reach the goal? Which legislature, chief executive, agency, business, landowner or combination of these?
- Do the decisions sought require structural change in a social system or run contrary to powerful interests or societal inertia?
- What groups in society have the necessary influence on decision makers to obtain the desired decision? Will quiet lobbying by insiders achieve the goal [politics as the art of the possible] or is mass mobilization and taking to the streets required [politics as the art of changing what's possible]? Are decision makers divided? Are opponents united or not?
- What, exactly, is wanted from these groups, and when?
- How can the groups whose support is needed be enlisted to bring about the right decision from decision makers? This requires answering several subsidiary questions: What are their interests and how do they see them? Which messages will emotionally resonate with the group and motivate action? How can the message be tied to the group's most fundamental assumptions about the world and therefore be cognitively satisfying? Which story is the most effective vehicle for carrying the message? Who is (are) the best messenger(s)? Which channels are the most effective for reaching the group? What can conservationists offer in return to groups whose support is solicited (quid pro quos, not shared values or goals, are the basis of much politics)?
- What is the plan for enlisting or mobilizing the groups identified? What resources exist or must be obtained to carry out the plan? How will their mobilization be sustained over the required period, including after decision-making and through implementation and enforcement?
- Who are the likely opponents of the desired decision and how can their opposition be minimized so that the relative power of the coalition in favor of the desired solution outweighs the power of opponents? How can this balance of power be sustained to ensure the decision isn't reversed or is a paper decision only?
- How will progress toward success be monitored and evaluated, especially given the very long time it can take to achieve ecological goals?
- A final consideration is best posed as admonition rather than question: avoid over-investment in a strategy or expectations and remain observant, open to suddenly appearing opportunities such as a crisis that weakens opponents or causes decision-makers to be more receptive. Strategies should not be lightly abandoned, but rigid adherence to plans or to a particular understanding of the political landscape will cause missed opportunities.

Scientists' predisposition to think in terms of imparting information is best seen as an intermediate goal. If they care about what happens biodiversity scientists are really in the business of imparting motivation for changes in individual behavior and more importantly, motivation for taking collective action (mobilization) in pursuit of goals that alter the behavior of institutions such as governments and businesses.

Should scientists be in the business of motivating changes in the behavior of institutions such as governments and businesses?

### III. GETTING THINGS DONE

There are several routes to mobilization scientists may take: directly organizing targeted groups or their leaders; advising those who do this; or more typically communicating scientific findings to activists, decision makers and others in ways that make them easy to incorporate in goal setting and action. Success in all of these depends on a good grasp of the answers to the questions posed in the fifth bullet—understanding how to make influential people feel an issue is urgent and personal so they act on it.

All three paths to action require communicating on three levels: emotion, needs and understanding. Messages mobilize when they evoke strong emotion: anger at nature's destruction and those doing it, love for wild places and other creatures, or pride in protecting the natural world. They must also enlist needs—the need to belong to a group, to be part of a cause, to have recognition for doing good, for a healthy world in which to live. Unfortunately human needs lend themselves easily to deformation and compensatory behavior. We can be socialized to eat food which is bad for us; or to go shopping or seek power when satisfying relationships are unavailable. Mobilization depends on breaking through these deformations of personality and touching genuine needs.

Mobilization also hinges on the cognitive aspects of appeals. This is more familiar territory for scientists who are in the business of explaining things. Culture—the guidance mechanism we rely in the absence of genetically

determined behavior—is not just about how the world works but about its meaning and purpose. Messages are most effective when they are anchored in people’s most deeply held notions of purpose (which are usually unquestioned and not easily tested). For example most people, religious and secular, have a deeply held belief in progress and any appeal challenging that faith is likely to be ignored. Mobilization is not about conversion, which is very difficult, but reaching people where they are at. (Conversion can occur in the face of personal or social crises and we need to be ready with alternatives when crises emerge.) So messages that seek to redefine progress rather than challenge it head on are likely to be more effective: progress is restoring the Earth to health, working less and spending more time outdoors connecting with nature, taking responsibility for caring for our real home and not converting more and more of the natural world into toys. Mobilization also depends on reinforcing and nurturing a sense of efficacy. People must believe they can make a difference before they will act.

We are storytelling animals. We don’t just enjoy stories, but explain and navigate the world through stories. Successful communication depends heavily on stories which are compelling—which are vivid, genuine, familiar, and have characters, problems or plots that target groups can identify with or find themselves in.

Ritual is also central to mobilization. When people act in unison in support of a cause, when they sing, dance and march together, when they publically proclaim their support for a goal and take action to achieve it, they are much more likely to follow through and persevere than when these are absent.

Organization is critical to generating and sustaining collective action. When people ask what can they do to help too often ecologists reply (if at all) with “send money” or “send a postcard to the President, write to your MP.” This low level of mobilization has proved insufficient to reach conservation goals; it does not create or sustain the sort of mass political force that can effectively reward and punish decision makers over the long haul. People must be *involved* in groups to develop a strong and active commitment to sustained action. Group involvement need not (and should not) be focused only on political activities, but include all those activities that constitute a community and deepen bonds among people. Outdoor activities such as wildlife viewing enhances empathy with nature

There is no substitute for re-immersing people in the world that gave us birth. Strip malls and electronic gadg-

ets are not only biologically sterile (at best) but they insulate us, as does most technology, from the consequences of our actions. Hiking, camping, even an afternoon in the woods, grassland or park can reconnect people with the life-giving. Restoring habitat, such as Trees for Life’s work on Scotland’s Caledonian Forest, creates and nurtures bonds of empathy and lends itself to regarding places and other creatures as the subjects of justice.

The written word will never be sufficient. The history of every effort to reorder societal priorities has relied on music, theater, and—in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—film to tell its story, to give people solace and courage and joy.

There are other attributes of groups that bring about successful change in addition. They include access to decision makers (or taking power and becoming decision makers), making allies among sectors of the elite (both are insider approaches to politics), mass action in the streets or withdrawal of cooperation (outsider approaches), recognition of opportunities, an unwillingness to compromise on goals and flexibility about means for realizing them, willingness to use the carrots and sticks available without timidity, and a record that convinces opponents and decision makers that we will never tire or go away.

The wheel has been invented. It is up to scientists and others who hold the great symphony of life on earth to be of the highest value to use the wheel effectively, intelligently, and forcefully.

# The Meaning of Human Nature

John Jacobi, *The Wildist Institute*

**H**uman nature” is an ambiguous term to begin with, but when applied to politics it justifiably raises eyebrows, the historically-learned immediately recalling wildly divergent, and often heinous, uses of the idea. By itself, it is about as clarifying as “freedom.” So here I will join the term with a technical outlook specific to wildism, along with a few distinctions that should help readers grasp our theoretical literature and purge from their mind any mixed associations with less rigorous or, worse, more repugnant meanings.

## I. SCIENTIFIC MATERIALIST WORLDVIEW

At the risk of becoming tedious to our regular readers, I must again emphasize that wildism begins with a scientific materialist worldview, since so often I carry on these discussions for some time before discovering that the core barrier between me and my opposite is a difference in our metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. For instance, it is difficult to have a clarifying discussion about human nature when you are unaware that the other person believes firmly in a supernatural spirit.

So before proceeding let’s be clear that humans are fully material creatures, without any supernatural component whatsoever. This includes mind and consciousness, both of which spring forth from the brain. Furthermore, humans are products of evolution by natural selection, primates descended from a common ancestor with all other primates, and animals descended from an even more common ancestor with all other animals. Human culture, like animal culture, is built from a biological and material base and does not come “from above” as some autonomous, non-material force. In the same vein, human behavior stems from material realities, a combination of biological and environmental factors. Note that although it is feasible that human culture is built from a combination of complex instincts—anyone familiar with non-human animal behavior knows how complex instincts can really be—data seems to support more nuanced theories, such as gene-culture coevolution, which help explain the apparent disparity between cultural and biological evolution in the human species.

With all this established, we can dispose of any accounts of human nature that rely on the existence of a supernatural realm, including frameworks that require “culture” to be a non-material thing autonomous from

biology. This of course challenges Marxist, Christian, and some feminist ideologies, among others.

## II. THE CONCEPT OF NATURE

And again I will remind the reader of the wildist meaning of “nature” generally. Recall from “The Foundations of Wildist Ethics” (pp. 15-17) that “nature” is meant in contrast to “artifice,” both of which are descriptive categories of things that exist in the entire material realm, called “the Cosmos.”

Broadly, “artifice” is “that which is made or controlled by humans or their technical systems” and “nature” is just the opposite, not made or controlled. This distinction is important in environmental ethics and conservation, as well as in other fields where the impact of humans and their civilizations is a primary concern. If anyone questions the validity of the division, let him observe the stark difference between a domesticated animal and a wild one, or a farmed landscape and the wilderness, or a dammed river and a free one.

Finally, remember always to distinguish between the two dominant notions of “nature.” The first equates it, as wildists do, with “the non-artificial.” But common in the physical sciences and sometimes in everyday speech, “Nature” is equivalent with “the Cosmos,” meant to be a contrast to the supernatural rather than the artificial.

## III. THE TECHNICAL MEANING OF HUMAN NATURE

The meaning of “human nature” follows intuitively from the meaning of “nature”: it is the part of human beings that is not made or controlled by them. Furthermore, the “naturalness” of human beings is a spectrum as it is in nature generally, and the degree of naturalness of a human trait, quality, or behavior depends on how strongly sustained it is by artificial energy input or how fully a product it is of that input. Essentially, a measurement of naturalness is a converse measurement of domestication, *wildness* being the quality of primary concern.

## IV. HUMAN VARIATION

“Human nature” in this sense applies to the entire species, so the focus is on human universals rather than variation. As such, the concept of “human nature” is not relevant to the quality of naturalness as it pertains to

aspects unique to individuals or human populations. Currently it is not even wholly within our ability to scientifically discern individual or population-level natures, although this is quickly changing.

## V. HUMAN NATURE VERSUS THE ESSENCE OF BEING HUMAN

Talk of human nature is not quite the same as talk of human “essence.” The latter tends to have an air of immutability about it, that is, once you’ve violated the “essence” you can no longer be considered human. However, this concept of “essence” isn’t really viable in the context of scientific materialism. We would be better off sticking to our technical concept of the spectrum from natural to artificial and to the biological concept of the species *Homo sapiens*. Of course, as the transhuman vision of cyborgs and microchipped brains becomes more of a reality, it *might* be useful to distinguish where on the spectrum from natural to artificial a human can no longer be called a human. However, that should be recognized as a separate measurement, and one not nearly as important in the wildist framework as the quality of naturalness is.

## VI. HUMAN NATURE VERSUS HUMAN BIOLOGY

“Human nature” is also not equivalent to “human biology.” Of course, any study of human nature is going to be rooted in biological concepts, since we are biological creatures. But a human being’s biology can be artificial, and large portions of the current species now have biologies that are at least partially artificial (or at least more artificial than natural). A classic example is lactose tolerance, which developed in human populations that relied on animal husbandry and faced evolutionary pressures, leaving those who had lactose tolerance alive and reproducing and decreasing the population of lactose intolerant individuals. This is not of special ethical note, but technically it is the product of artificial rather than natural pressures.

Furthermore, many aspects of human nature, particularly the behavioral part, can be explained in terms that are not strictly biological (although of course these findings shouldn’t contradict biological understandings). And these parts, like the more concretely biological parts, can be artificial as well.

## VII. “BIOLOGICAL,” “NATURAL,” AND “INNATE” DO NOT MEAN “UNCHANGEABLE”

Some people believe that “human nature” means “unchangeable.” However, neither the wildist technical sense of the term, nor any of the concepts confused with it, are unchangeable. This should be clearest in the case of wildist technical terminology, since it explicitly acknowledges that natural things can be made artificial. However, it is also true for “biological,” as was noted in the case of lactose intolerance in humans, and this is only becoming more true with biotechnics. “Innate” behavior (versus “learned” behavior) is also changeable, usually only through biological modification, but in some cases through severe conditioning as well. Also remember that both “biological” and “innate” behaviors can reside anywhere on the spectrum from natural to artificial. For instance, one can observe innate but artificial behaviors in domesticated animals, like dogs.

## VIII. RESPONSE TO MARXIST AND LEFTIST CRITICISMS

Marxist and leftist critics argue that Darwinian accounts of human nature justify the oppression of the ruling class. For example, the wage gap is in the eyes of many leftists a product of patriarchal oppression, but some evidence seems to support the idea that the wage gap is a product of several factors that have little to do with oppression, such as natural gender differences in job preference.

However, arguing that this is the case is not the same as arguing that you should feel a specific way about it. If Marxists wish to live in a world without a wage gap, the wage gap need not be a product of oppression. They can simply argue for mitigation of our biological behaviors in cases where they can’t be outright changed, and as technologies become more advanced they can, of course, change them outright.

Nevertheless, I think Marxists are right to say that ascribing the quality of “naturalness” has political power. Although wildists speak of the quality in a somewhat technical and exact sense, the actual normative ideas behind wildism are widespread. People tend to value naturalness in many aspects of their daily life, and they are skeptical when they hear that their behavior, beliefs, or biologies are being artificially modified. Even the Marxist concern with oppression is a politic that favors nature over artificial institutions that deprive humans of their expressions of that nature, although clearly the empirical evidence simply has not supported the Marxists’ specific account. But to this I say that if people

are concerned with naturalness, they are best off with a proper understanding of it, and this is granted not through dogma, but through scientific investigation. If this yields unfavorable consequences, then so be it. When facts are subordinated for the sake of ethical values, you only end up being more ignorant and less ethical, and that's clearly not desirable.

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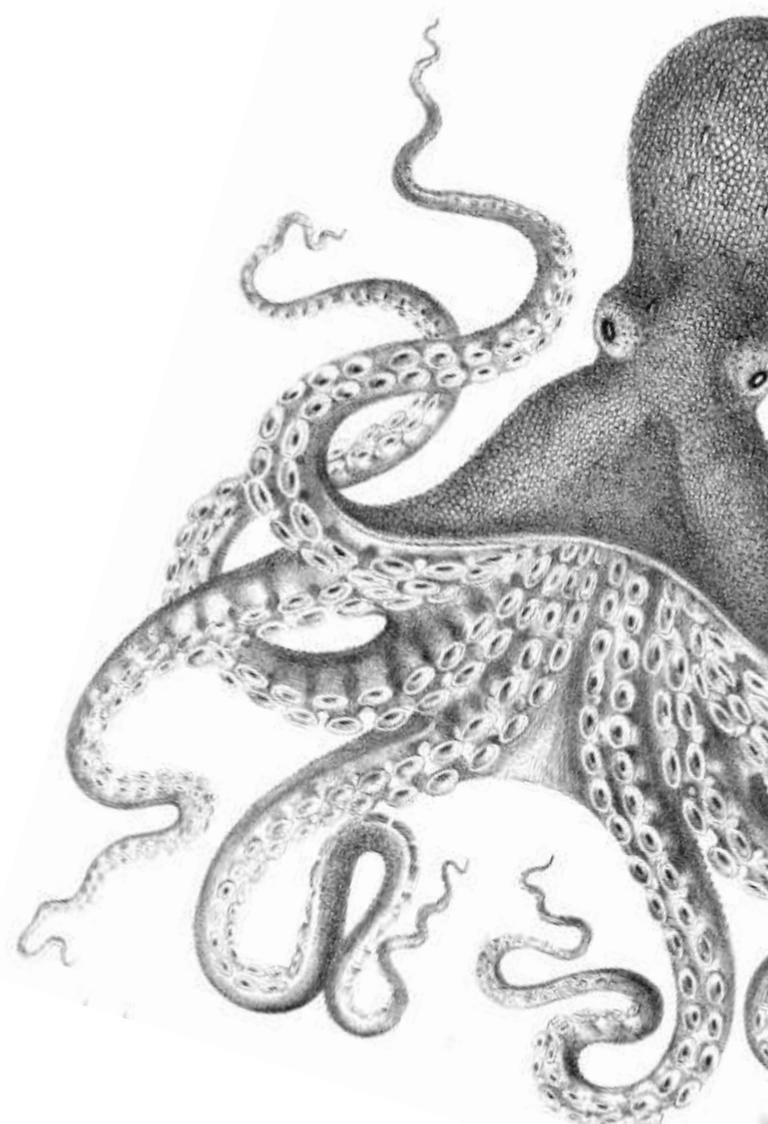
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# Review: *Green Delusions* by Martin Lewis

John Jacobi, *The Wildist Institute*

**Abstract—**Martin Lewis' *Green Delusions* is a critique of various forms of radical environmentalism. This review explores how these critiques relate to the wildist ideology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Martin Lewis is a former believer in radical environmentalism who published *Green Delusions* to refute these ideologies once he came to the realization that, according to him, the very things he once opposed actually offer the best way to institute environmentalist values. Worse, he claims, the more radical of radical environmentalisms would actually *betray* these values.

While some reviews have said that Lewis constructs a straw man, my own experience has confirmed that the grassroots of the environmental movement consists of individuals thoroughly confused about technology, primitive life, and the impotence of irrationalism as a basis for politics. Certainly some eco-radicals, thankfully the most influential, have more robust and scientifically-informed views, but they are by no means the majority, and in practice “radical environmentalism” often obscures facts for the sake of its ideology, rather than its ideology building from facts.

All that said, Lewis does only attack the low-hanging fruit, not really interacting with the more sophisticated non-marxist environmentalisms in a fair way. This review outlines those pitfalls in relation to wildism, explaining that, with the exception of some elements of his “decoupling” thesis, nearly all elements of his critique are irrelevant to the ideology.

## II. A BOOK WITH FEW WEAKNESSES

Although Lewis occasionally appears daft or overly polemical, *Delusions* is mostly a strong text, one that I wholeheartedly recommend to any eco-radical. In fact, if a radical cannot weather the storm Lewis sends his way, he ought to seriously reconsider the basis of his radicalism.

This is especially true regarding the scientific evidence presented in each chapter. Lewis points out, and he is unfortunately correct, that many, if not most, eco-radicals base their politics on unfounded, dubious, or

flat-out wrong assumptions. Perhaps the strongest examples of this are those outlined in chapter two, “Primal Purity and Balance,” in which Lewis critiques both the noble savage idea and the idea that ecosystems have a “natural balance” (this, while true in some respects, is not true to the degree that many eco-radicals would need it to be to support their conclusions; see Hettinger & Throop, 1999).

Lewis also makes several powerful arguments against irrationalism. Writing with the correct assumption that most environmentalists are from the left, he writes, “Irrationalism may be inherently radical, but it can just as easily be harnessed to the radical right, as examples of the philosopher Heidegger and of the deconstructionist savant Paul de Man—onetime nazis both—so clearly show” (p. 161). Related is his critique of the environmentalist obsession with Eastern religions. On this point he quotes an interesting passage by van Wolferen (1990, p. 241):

*Actually, the historical function of Japanese Zen, which thrived among the warrior class, was to lower the resistance of the individual against the blind obedience expected of him, as can be gathered from the common Zen imagery of ‘destroying’ or ‘extinguishing’ the mind. Indeed, all of the Asian creeds so eagerly embraced by eco-radicals have been associated with notoriously anti-liberal political regimes.*

Later chapters in the book critique anti-technology stances, predictably arguing for technical progress primarily on the basis of medical values, and anti-capitalist stances, arguing that capitalism is better for third world countries than collapse would be, again on the basis of humanist values. For a wildist, his arguments in favor of capitalism will likely be somewhat boring, his most interesting claim instead being that the collapse of technical and economic infrastructure would betray environmentalist values.

As a part of his proposed alternative, he notes an important point regarding the “limits to growth” hypothesis (p. 185):

*Limits do exist for specific resources, but in the most important cases they are so remote as to be virtually meaningless. Using the same logic one*

*could declare all human endeavors futile, seeing that the sun will eventually go supernova and consume everything. More importantly, environmentalists must come to understand that economic growth increasingly entails not the ever mounting consumption of energy and raw materials, but rather ever increasing value added--which as often as not is accomplished through miniaturization, partial dematerialization, and the breakdown of the very distinction between goods and services.*

Lewis is probably correct. Although it is possible that miniaturization will combine with expansion to create a hyper-technical landscape, current environmental problems are more likely to ensure that economic practices will go through a rapid change in the future, resulting in less growth in exchange for more value added, and resulting, ideally, in more efficient and stable distribution of resources. Several from the technician class have predicted as much.

Some weaknesses of the book do stand out. In particular, although Lewis clearly understands radical environmentalism, having belonged to the movement once himself, he sometimes makes arguments that he should know would be unconvincing to a radical. For example, in a chapter that is otherwise quite good, he supports his argument that urbanism is better for the environment by writing that “public transport, which is almost always less polluting than travel by private automobile, is feasible only in and between cities.” As if the travel practices of primitive man, or even transportation in agricultural societies, even approached the damage done by industrial public transport! He also says that he “can only shudder” at Aldo Leopold feeling “unspeakable delight” while hunting (p. 96), which is a classic case of the pathological aversion to violence present in many modern oversocialized individuals.

Finally, Lewis shows a clear and probably undue bias for eco-marxism, calling it the “most sophisticated of eco-radical ideologies.” But he ignores two important facts. First, non-marxist radical environmentalism is much newer than marxism, so it necessarily possesses a smaller theoretical body of knowledge. Second, some circles, who Lewis only ever addresses fleetingly or indirectly, have actually developed rather strong and reasoned foundations for their radicalism. This is the same circle that produced

the field of conservation biology, The Wildlands Network, the concept of rewilding, and the now-defunct publication, *Wild Earth*.

### III. RARELY CHALLENGES WILDISM

Unfortunately, Lewis’ strongest arguments, his scientific ones, are so strong precisely because most eco-radicals favor irrationalism and utopianism as the basis for their resistance. However, since wildism is built within the context of scientific materialism, most of the critiques do not apply to it.

For instance, Lewis argues that radical environmentalism is built on four faulty assumptions: (1) that primitive peoples lived or live harmoniously with nature; (2) that small-scale political structures are more socially and ecologically benign; (3) that technical progress is inherently bad for the environment; (4) that capitalism is inherently bad for the environment. He further argues that eco-radicalism’s main energy is derived from the belief “that continued economic growth is absolutely impossible, given the limits of a finite planet.”

However, almost none of this applies to wildism. In addition to its scientific materialism, wildism is mostly immune from these critiques because it is a non-humanist ideology, so does not hold dear the values of large-scale solidarity, equality, non-violence, and so forth. Rather, in lieu of social progressivism, wildists argue for the conservation imperative to be extended to human nature, which is known to come with bad (or “bad”) aspects as well as good ones, just as in nature generally. For this reason, nomadic hunter/gatherer life is a useful model not because primitive peoples live (or lived) “harmoniously” with non-human nature, but because they represent, in a rough way, the natural state of man. Scientific findings based on this insight have been revealed by sociobiology and its cousins.

Furthermore, although primitive peoples do not always live in an ecologically benign manner, they are several orders less damaging to the environment than industry. Oftentimes critiques of the noble savage mythology fail to note this, instead relying on the shock value that comes with the direct character of primitive man’s ecological damage. Thus, the point is not that primitive peoples necessarily live morally good lives, but that they at least live less bad ones, and this is ensured not by some naïve faith in human self-restraint, but by the hard, material limits of primitive technics.

On the question of technical progress, wildists do not insist that specific instances of technical progress

are inherently bad for the environment, which is significant because the rebutting evidence Lewis offers often consists only of this. Wildists also note that technical progress could, hypothetically, be good for some aspects of naturalness, such as biodiversity. However, the core contention of wildism is that conservation should always aim to restore nature's autonomy, or its *wildness*, and so far technical progress *as a whole* has necessarily amounted to a loss of this autonomy.

Thus, wildism demonstrates a reasoned way to come to eco-radical conclusions. The argument goes something like this: nature has intrinsic value, and the wildness of nature is of the utmost importance, even such that civilization at least until now has been morally unjustifiable. Since civilization arguably can't and almost assuredly won't be reformed into something sufficiently benign, the most moral way forward is probably to dispense of industry completely. Nearly none of what Lewis says is a great challenge to this, given the starting value of wildness.

The critiques most relevant to wildism are closely related to the half-earth idea, which poses, so far as we at the institute can tell, the only viable challenge to the idea that collapse is the way out of our ecological problems. This idea will be addressed on its own in a later piece. It is enough to say here that the strongest critiques relevant to wildism do not challenge the core value of wildness, but demand that wildists eco-radicals consider what other values have to be present for them to favor collapse over the alternatives. Lewis' particular alternative (he calls it "Promethean environmentalism") is inadequate, but evidence he offers strengthens the relevance of the central dilemma: if further development can mostly decouple humans from non-human nature, which is possible in some significant ways, would wildness-centered eco-radicals be willing to sacrifice the wildness of human nature in exchange for the wildness of non-human nature, or must they have both?

For instance, Lewis points out that densely packed urban industrial environments more efficiently use land and resources than rural environments, leaving more land for wildlife. Although this could be akin to the argument that public transport is desirable because it is better than cars, I find this argument to be somewhat more sensible, because collapse will not happen in all places at once, which means a potentially long period of ruralization in some areas before the period of technical regression ends. This could mean a lot of damage to wildlife. Furthermore, Lewis offers some

evidence that non- or minimally-industrial back-to-the-land living could be more harmful than cities. This is mostly anecdotal, however, and also relies on emotional capital in the same way critiques of noble savagism do, so more data is needed to support the point.

Lewis' argument is made stronger, of course, by the possibility of an even more radical decoupling for which industrial cities lay the foundation. That is, new digital technologies, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and so forth could decrease the ecological footprint of each human being by several orders, potentially to a level smaller than even primitive man. This may make the population decrease that has historically come with industrialization sufficient to make the late industrial mode of production less harmful to non-human nature than primitive modes of production. In the context of transhumanist ideas, like uploading human consciousness to the internet, this idea starts to look like the best of both worlds: progressivists get to continue technical progress for humans, while at the same time non-human nature will continue to be restored.

I and a few others at the institute believe that there are serious problems with this idea, reflecting many of the points brought up by McCarthy (1993), but we have outlined neither our moral rebuttal nor our empirical doubts. Because of this, Lewis currently has the upper hand, and the "decoupling" aspect of his critique is a profoundly important consideration for wildists.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Lewis' critique of radical environmentalism is unfortunately stronger than it should be, because among the grassroots activists that form the majority of the movement, irrationalism reigns supreme, as do humanist values. This is especially true in regards to radical environmentalist accounts of small-scale societies and noble savage mythologies. However, because wildists are not bound to humanist values and insist on a scientific analysis, Lewis' critique is mostly impotent for us. Nevertheless, to the extent that it is feasible, his "decoupling" thesis offers an attractive potential alternative to collapse, and a pressing concern for wildists should be outlining the moral and empirical criticisms of this alternative, if they exist.

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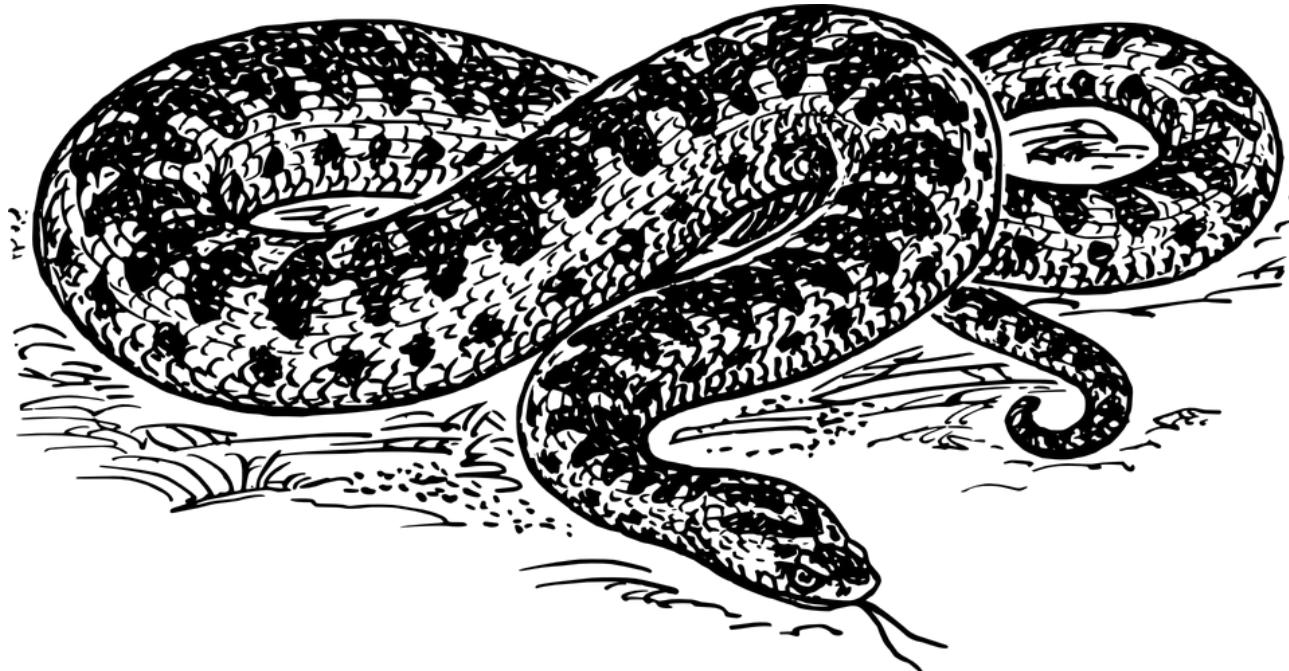
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# Briefly Noted: Letters and Reviews

**The Nature of Technology** by Brian Arthur. **The Free Press** (2009), 256pp. \$16. ISBN 9781416544067. — John Jacobi

An alright book on technical evolution. Arthur's strong point is his refusal to shoe-horn technical evolution into the biological paradigm, even if there might be similarities. His solution is a compelling but still inadequate account of "combinatorial evolution." The opening and closing remarks of his book are also interesting commentaries on the tension between the technical and the biological that is of so much interest to wildist politics.

**The Evolution of Everything** by Matt Ridley. **Harper-Collins** (2015), 368pp. \$29. ISBN 9780062296009. — John Jacobi

Simultaneously I have strong negative and positive feelings about this book, but I don't hesitate to recommend it to wildists. It covers a lot of the same information that was given in "The Foundations of Wildist Ethics" in issue one, sometimes to such a similar extent that I'm astounded that I hadn't read this book before writing it. In particular, Ridley's chapter on population was very similar to what I wrote about race, eugenics, and social Darwinism, and Ridley's is arguably a better historical overview. However, since he is a polemicist for industrial free markets and seems to be associated with the Tea Party, if only implicitly, his book often devolves into very political jabs that decrease its quality. Furthermore, he doesn't seem to realize the incoherence of some aspects of his philosophy. I'm reminded of a quote from Kaczynski's "Industrial Society and Its Future": "The conservatives are fools: They whine about the decay of traditional values, yet they enthusiastically support technological progress and economic growth. Apparently it never occurs to them that you can't make rapid, drastic changes in the technology and the economy of a society without causing rapid changes in all other aspects of the society as well, and that such rapid changes inevitably break down traditional values."

**Final Solutions** by Richard Lerner. **Pennsylvania State University Press** (1992), 260pp. \$30.95. ISBN 9780271028026. — John Jacobi

In this book Lerner argues that sociobiologists may be paving the way for some politics similar to Nazism in the

same way early biologists did for Nazism itself. For the most part, the arguments are dismal, and the book is not that great. However, it is useful because to date I've not found another book that so comprehensively presents the "sociobiologists are Nazis" argument, and it is very useful to be knowledgeable of these arguments as wildists who depend on sociobiology for their political theory. Furthermore, even though Lerner's particular argument is absurd, wildists should pay attention to the way Nazis used biology for their political efforts, if only to be sure we are not getting ourselves into scary political waters. Finally, Lerner doesn't speak too directly on this issue, employing a lot of dog whistling techniques in any discussion he does have, but sociobiology and the reality of human population differences do come with political implications that require careful consideration, and although Lerner does not provide that careful consideration, it at least makes the topics clearer than would a sociobiologist, important as it is for them to treat the issues delicately after the backlash in the 70s.

**The Triumph of Sociobiology** by John Alcock. **Oxford University Press** (2003), 272pp. \$50. ISBN 9780195163353. — John Jacobi

This book covers some of the history of the controversy around sociobiology and, wading through it, explains what sociobiology is actually about. It does this well, but unfortunately I have already read Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, which presents much of the same evidence with better writing and in a much more engaging manner. Nevertheless, it is a short book and useful for anyone who hasn't yet read Pinker, or who doesn't have the time for his lengthy tomes.

**Letters to a Young Scientist** by E. O. Wilson. **W. W. Norton & Co.** (2014), 256pp. \$21.95. ISBN 9780871403858. — John Jacobi

Wilson gives young scientists his own approach to scientific work and, as always, a bit of his personal philosophy. It is useful for wildists for two reasons. First, much of the wisdom Wilson has to impart is useful and applies to young reactionaries as well. Second, wildists should pay attention to the psychological effects Wilson achieves in appealing to young people. Science and engineering are

nowadays largely sustained by mass movements, so employ much of the same techniques revolutionary efforts must, and Wilson's book is a prime example of their use.

**Our Final Hour** by Martin Rees. **Basic Books (2004), 240pp. \$16.95. ISBN 9780465068630.** — John Jacobi

Although highly recommended by other wildists and conservationists, I found this book to be quite boring. It wasn't bad, *per se*, but it seemed to go on for pages without saying anything substantial, and in my opinion the threats Rees identified are not nearly as important as many of the ones he ignored.

**A Short History of Progress** by Richard Wright. **Carroll & Graf (2004), 224pp. \$12.45. ISBN 9780786715473.** — John Jacobi

A good prelude to *Collapse* by Jared Diamond, Wright briefly explores the collapses of several civilizations through history and explains how these accounts are especially useful for our own time. Wright's book used to be a favorite of mine to recommend, but as I become more aware of his own politics, and since I've reread the book, I've been less enthused. Mostly this is because it is obvious Wright is using "crisis rhetoric" in order to push a certain political agenda, something that comes through especially in his interviews. This of course makes the objectivity of his work suspect, so while I still recommend the book, I also recommend that people supplement it with more scholarly works on the topic of collapse.

**The Eclipse of Man** by Charles Rubin. **Encounter Books (2014), 200pp. \$23.99. ISBN 9781594037368.** — John Jacobi

Rubin is one of the men behind several conservative publications that address new technologies, particularly biotechnology, and this is his take on transhumanism. To date, it is the best tract rebutting transhumanism that I know of, unparalleled in its thoughtfulness and the sharpness of his critique. Particularly surprising is how much I enjoyed his technique of employing literature and art rather than science to make his arguments, something I usually find dull. The last chapter is an especially powerful critique of progress, applicable to all progressivisms, not just transhumanism. Highly recommended.

**The New Atlantis** at [www.thenewatlantis.com](http://www.thenewatlantis.com) — John Jacobi

This publication deals with the ethical issues surrounding biotechnology, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and other highly disruptive technological fields that humans seem not quite prepared to address. It is sponsored by several conservative organizations, so some bias is expected and apparent, but probably the kind that would be regarded well by wildists. The editorial position places emphasis on nature, critiques progressivism, tears apart Lockean concepts of improving nature with labor, is sympathetic to Darwinism even as it is critical of it, and is also, interestingly, known for being critical of anti-humanist environmentalism. It seems, though, that the publication confuses anti-humanism with anti-human, and wildists too are critical of the latter, which has sometimes been expressed by even our forebears like Dave Foreman. In any case, the publication may be an ally in our cause and is undoubtedly a source for ripe ideas.

**Consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics?** — John Jacobi

Several have asked me whether I regard wildist ethics to be consequentialist, deontological, or some version of virtue ethics. I do not know. I do mention it as a problem to be sorted out in normative scientific fields, and for the most part I think the role of conservation and medical journals address it adequately. In any case, the division between the three kinds of ethical systems seems a little off, and is, I think, deserving of some scrutiny. Still, if I had to give an answer, I would say that wildism is some mix of the first and last. But I've done enough philosophizing about these issues, and it seems that any further thinking on this question is a question of perfecting the ethical systematization rather than doing anything practical. This is not to degrade the task, and I actually find it very interesting, a sort of temptation. But my task is a broader one, and I can't concern myself with such an arcane question, so far as I can tell right now. I leave it up to another wildist with other goals than my own. I feel more of a pull to lay the broad foundations for a long-lasting movement, and maybe if I am satisfied with this work I will revisit the question myself. For now, let's leave this one for the ethicists and philosophers in the academy.

**Applying KISS to Wildism** — John Jacobi

"[The Foundations of Wildist Ethics](#)" divided tenets of wildism into five: (1) metaphysical and epistemological

foundations; (2) concern for nature; (3) a critique of progress; (4) the imperative to conserve human nature; (5) the imperative to conserve wildlands. Altogether, the essay went on, they produce a possible imperative to engage in an anti-industrial reaction. Although the fivefold division was necessary for the amount of content due to each topic, the overall framework can be simplified. Henceforth wildist ideas will be communicated and learned with a threefold division: (1) the foundational starting point of scientific materialism; (2) the critique of progress, including social progressivism; (3) the imperative to rewild, including the imperative to engage in an anti-industrial reaction. The idea of Cosmos as Divinity has been rightly criticized as “gimmicky,” and will be subsumed into the materialist worldview, dropping the religious argo-bargle and simply using words like “numinous,” “awe-inspiring,” and so forth.

### **Flawed Science in “[Foundations](#)” — John Jacobi**

Although most of the science in “Foundations” was sound, a few errors need to be noted. First, at one point I write about Marvin Harris’ theory that certain religious ideas in India were selected by ecological conditions, and speculate that the wildist ideology could fulfill a similar role in our time. This is definitely wrong. For one thing, Harris’ theory is suspect. For another, functionalism can only be applied in limited contexts, and the current context is not one of them. Wildism is far too abstract and in dealing with long-term problems it becomes better classified under “abstract ideology” than “selected superstructure.”

I also use the term “cultural, not biological.” In very limited contexts this might be justifiable, but it obscures the fact that all human behaviors stem from biology, since we are biological creatures. Of course, the environment can effect that biology, as is clear from the phenomenon of learning, among other things. But ultimately human behavior is produced by chemicals, neurons, involuntary biological processes, and other such things as they are when they interact with the surrounding environment.

Finally, although we have no answer on it now, for the sake of a coherent and unified analysis, wildists are going to have to settle on either kin selection theory and group or multi-level selection theory. The former is the dominant perspective in biology, and one that I am personally sympathetic to. However, much theoretical work on technical evolution and gene-culture co-evolution has been done under the assumption that multi-level selection theory is correct. This creates some subtle tensions in the

theoretical work on which wildism is based. This is a complex topic deserving of special treatment, but know, at least, the “Foundations” suffers from some tension between the two theories and until this is resolved, there is the potential for widely diverging theoretical perspectives, which is not desirable when it comes to such a fundamental aspect of our theory.